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DE RUEHEGA #1420 1341542  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH ZUI RUEWMC7277 1341542  
O 141542Z MAY 07  
FM AMEMBASSY CAIRO  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0000  
INFO ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

UNCLAS CAIRO 001420

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ELA AND DRL/IRF(WCOFSKY)  
NSC FOR RWATERS

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [EG](#)  
SUBJECT: EGYPT: SECTARIAN CLASHES NEAR CAIRO

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SUMMARY  
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11. (SBU) A MAY 11 CLASH BETWEEN MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN VILLAGERS SOUTH OF CAIRO OVER A CHURCH CONSTRUCTION CONTROVERSY -- WHICH NOW APPEARS TO BE CONTAINED BY A PROMPT SECURITY SERVICE REACTION -- SERVES AS A REMINDER OF THE UNDERCURRENTS OF SECTARIAN TENSION THAT EXIST IN EGYPT. WITH MANY HOUSES AND SHOPS DESTROYED, DOZENS ARRESTED, AND SEVERAL BADLY HURT, IT IS A NEAR-MIRACLE THAT NO ONE WAS KILLED. LEADERS FROM BOTH THE MUSLIM AND COPTIC COMMUNITIES ARE NEGOTIATING A SETTLEMENT TO REDUCE TENSIONS. END SUMMARY.

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SECTARIAN VIOLENCE IN BEMHA  
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12. (U) MAY 12, SECTARIAN VIOLENCE BROKE OUT IN BEMHA, A VILLAGE OF ABOUT 6,000 LOCATED 45 KM. SOUTH OF CAIRO. INITIAL PRESS REPORTS SAID THAT MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN VIOLENCE WAS SPARKED BY COPTIC VILLAGERS (ABOUT ONE-SIXTH OF THE POPULATION) SEEKING TO BUILD A CHURCH NEAR A LOCAL MOSQUE. ACCORDING TO LOCAL MEDIA, FIGHTING BROKE OUT WHICH RESULTED IN LOOTING AND BURNING OF CHRISTIAN RESIDENCES AND SHOPS. 59 WERE ARRESTED, 12 WERE INJURED, AND NO ONE WAS KILLED.

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SPARKED BY RUMORS  
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13. (SBU) ACCORDING TO EMBASSY CONTACTS, THE CHRISTIANS HAD RECEIVED "ORAL PERMISSION" FROM THE MAYOR OF THE VILLAGE AND FROM STATE SECURITY TO USE A SMALL APARTMENT AS A PLACE OF WORSHIP. IN ADDITION, COPTIC CHURCH OFFICIALS HAD SUBMITTED AN APPLICATION TO BUILD A NEW CHURCH THREE MONTHS AGO, BUT HAD NOT YET RECEIVED PERMISSION TO PROCEED. APPARENTLY, THE WEEKEND CLASHES WERE SPARKED BY A RUMOR THAT THE CHRISTIANS WERE GOING TO BUILD THE CHURCH WITHOUT A LICENSE. MUSLIM VILLAGERS, LED BY A LOCAL IMAM, ALLEGEDLY DISTRIBUTED PAMPHLETS COMPLAINING ABOUT THIS, AND LABELING COPTS AS "ATHEISTS." AFTER FRIDAY PRAYERS, A GROUP OF ABOUT 300 MUSLIMS CLASHED WITH A GROUP OF ABOUT 200 CHRISTIANS, BOTH GROUPS ARMED WITH STICKS AND BRICKS. BY THE END OF THE DAY, 36 CHRISTIAN-OWNED HOMES AND SHOPS WERE DAMAGED, BURNED, AND LOOTED, WHILE 12 CHRISTIANS WERE INJURED, ONE OF THEM SERIOUSLY. HUNDREDS OF SECURITY PERSONNEL SEALED THE VILLAGE AND ARRESTED 35 MUSLIMS.

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DENOUNCED BY THE GRAND IMAM  
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14. (U) A STATEMENT ISSUED BY THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR ON MAY 11 STATED THAT 500 MUSLIM GATHERED IN RESPONSE TO THE RUMOR THAT CHRISTIANS WERE PLANNING TO BUILD A CHURCH WITHOUT A LICENSE, AND THREE CHRISTIANS WERE INJURED. SUSPECTS HAD BEEN ARRESTED, AND AN INVESTIGATION, THE STATEMENT SAID, IS ONGOING. MEANWHILE, GRAND IMAM TANTAWI CONDEMNED THE INCIDENT AND SAID THOSE RESPONSIBLE FOR IT WERE "INSANE."

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NDP MEDIATES  
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15. (SBU) EMBASSY CONTACTS SAY THAT LOCAL MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN LEADERS MET TOGETHER AFTER THE INCIDENT UNDER THE MEDIATION OF A SENIOR NDP OFFICIAL FROM THE AREA TO DISCUSS THE WAY FORWARD. ACCORDING TO THIS SOURCE, THE CHRISTIANS HAVE DEMANDED COMPENSATION FOR DESTROYED AND DAMAGED PROPERTY, THE ARREST AND PROSECUTION OF THE PERPETRATORS, AND PERMISSION TO BUILD A CHURCH. MUSLIM LEADERS REPORTEDLY COUNTERED WITH AN OFFER TO PAY COMPENSATION IF THE CHRISTIANS WILL DROP CHARGES AGAINST THE ALLEGED RINGLEADERS.  
RICCIARDONE